

Good morning Chairman Wenstrup, Chairman Comer and members of the Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Pandemic

Thank you for inviting me to testify today regarding the horrific, preventable tragedy that unfolded in elder care facilities in the spring of 2020 that took the lives of over 16,000 seniors in New York State, including my husband's parents.

Mickey and Dee Newman were married for almost 60 years. They lived in the same four-story walk-up in Brooklyn for decades where they raised three children, Donna, Michael and Sean. Mickey was in the U.S. Air Force and joined the Fire Department of the City of New York, serving for 23 years in Engine Company 323 in Brooklyn.

Dee was a devoted wife, mother and grandmother and worked at the local dentist office part time. She never missed a birthday or an anniversary and there are still days where my husband has the urge to call her on his drive home from work, which was part of his daily routine.

Before the pandemic, Mickey had a series of health issues. He was in a nursing home for rehab to get into better shape before joining his wife Dee at an assisted living residence.

And then came COVID-19.

Sean got a call in the late morning at the end of March 2020 and was told that his dad wasn't doing well. He had a fever and his breathing was labored. Three hours later he was dead.

Sean had to break the news on the phone to his mom in lockdown that her husband had died. It was the hardest thing he's ever done.

My husband saw his mom once in early April after that to bring her some flowers. He couldn't pass the front desk. He saw her in the lobby, for only one or two minutes, standing ten feet away with a mask on. He told her he loved her. She started to cry before he left.

He would never see her again.

A few days later Dee's health went downhill. She was moved to the hospital, tested and diagnosed with covid 19.

The last time Sean spoke to his mom she told him her throat was raw and she had trouble breathing. Despite her ill health, her final words were to ask him to buy Easter presents for her grandkids and to please write her name on the card.

A nurse called us the next day to tell us she was in and out of consciousness. A day later, she died.

Our grief and confusion turned to anger in the days and weeks afterwards as we learned about how elder care homes were turned into death traps. Over 9,000 covid positive patients were piled into their facilities for 46 days and no one told the families.

Three years later, we still don't know why.

Our former disgraced governor Andrew Cuomo said more than once that covid inside nursing homes would spread like fire through dry grass. He knew the elderly were the most susceptible. And yet he let it happen. He lit the match and set the fire.

All of us here today would like to know the origins of where that March 25th order came from, and why nursing homes were prohibited to test incoming patients. It is worth mentioning here that while care homes could not have access to tests, Andrew Cuomo's friends and family were secretly able to secure tests and use state resources to quickly find out the results.

The other question we've never had answered is why weren't the facilities provided by the federal government used? There were thousands of empty beds at Jacob Javits Center, the USS Comfort ship and several other ad hoc hospitals while nursing homes were packed with sick people. It was recently revealed that a US Navy Admiral on board the comfort ship quote "begged the Cuomo administration to send patients to the nearly-empty hospital ship docked on the Hudson River during the height of the pandemic — but instead of helping, his pleas were met with politics and paranoia."

Many couldn't see loved ones before they died, or have wakes or funerals for them. Instead of doing his job to protect our families, the former disgraced governor was busy getting his staff to write a 5.1 million dollar book, win various awards including an emmy, and blaming everything and everyone for the mistakes he made.

He likes to say our advocacy is political. But, not one grieving family member I have met has told me who they vote for. All we've ever wanted was a fair, bipartisan investigation into why so many of our elderly died painfully and alone.

The death toll in our senior living facilities in New York alone is bigger than September 11th and Hurricane Katrina combined. There have been hearings and accountability about those tragic events, why should this be any different?

And as much as I am grateful to be invited here today, having hearings alone won't bring us justice.

We need to learn from this tragedy to make sure it never happens again. To turn grief into purpose and find out what happened to our parents and our grandparents who trusted us and our leaders to look out for them.

Thank you.

